



HEEEERE'S JOHNNY!
Matthew 3:1-12

I know I might be showing my age today with my opening illustration. How many of you can remember the Tonight Show with Johnny Carson? Almost every evening Ed McMahon opened the show by saying “Heeeere’s Johnny.”

Well, that’s exactly what Matthew and the other gospel writers do to prepare the way for the ministry and mission of Jesus Christ. John the Baptizer is a most colorful and provocative servant of God. In **Matthew 11:11**, it says of John, “No one in history surpasses John the Baptizer.” (Msg). That is quite an endorsement from Jesus!

John the Baptizer is not the way – but he is a follower of the way. His prophetic ministry stood in the biblical tradition of Isaiah and Elijah (Matthew 11:14). Those credentials were well known to the Jewish establishment. He came to prepare the way for the Messiah of the kingdom.

As we open our lesson in **verse 1** today we see that John the Baptizer’s ministry begins in the stark desert countryside of Judea - and not in the holy and sacred city of Jerusalem. It is as though God must first purge from his soul and spirit all that would hinder him from the mission that God has in store for him. In the desert he can be trained and disciplined by the Spirit for the expectations that God has of him – and not his culture and country’s expectations of him.

The great Bible teacher Karl Barth once said, “Sometimes our hands must be emptied – so that we can grasp what God wants us to grasp and hold onto.” We know the **Psalms 46:10** is correct when it declares, “Be still and know that I am God.” Very little progress can be made in the realm of the Spirit without the protection and blessing of solitude.

There is no Disney World environment – the desert of entertainment and ecstasy. Here in the desert – the corruption that has overtaken the Temple in Jerusalem is gone. Here the concern is not for institutional properness and preservation – but the purpose and will and way of the kingdom.

In **verse 2** we see that John’s message is not easy or politically correct – but it is theologically correct. ‘Change your life – God’s kingdom is here.’ Theological thunder – a warning shot is fired.

It is very threatening to hear “I must change” when I think I have got it all together. ‘Change those no good Romans and Gentiles – but not us – the chosen people of God.’

As I studied and took notes and reflected on these 12 verses – I want you to know that there is nothing easy going about John. At times I simply said, “Whew” and wiped my brow. I knew someone would say, “What did St. Mary do to him this week to put him in such a lousy mood? Get him some Roloids.”

John the Baptizer gets his identity – his DNA so to speak – from God and not from human authorities. We like pastors and religious leaders who look good on posters and television. Leaders with a bit of glamour. We like three-piece suits and big smiles. A bit of fashion and fame. We like crystal cathedrals – astro domes – and big platforms.

John’s food and clothing defy fashion. His focus is not on the outward appearance – but on the heart and soul of a believer.

John is not ‘reasonable’ accommodating himself to the culture. He transformed culture – not the other way around.

John is not diplomatic or tactful. He does not take a survey or conduct a Gallup poll to see how he can meet the needs of the people. He believes that God – and the way he designed for human life - will meet all the deepest longings, needs, and appetites of the human soul and spirit.

So John begins with a great ‘altar call’ right there at the River Jordan. Tough message. Thunder in the desert. Turn or burn.

However, in **verse 5** we see that people flocked out of the Holy City of Jerusalem and came to the River Jordan. People braved the harsh elements and journeyed out riding their camels and donkeys to hear John preach. They did not get that kind of preaching at First Church – Jerusalem. In the 18th century – people would not darken the doors of the Church of England – but they would wake early in the morning to hear a man called John Wesley preach the gospel. John Wesley said, “I would set myself on fire with the Holy Spirit – and invite people to watch me burn.” And people did.

You won’t hear the words “Heeeeere’s Johnny” except in the pages of sacred scripture. The marketplace knows full well the message of John the Baptist will lead you in a different direction. Instead of lining up at the Rockvale and Hershey Outlets and the Wal-Mart store at midnight on Thursday – you will be taking time to remember who you are – and your divine calling and vocation. That is why there are no John the Baptist Christmas cards and praise choruses.

John the Baptizer knows before you rush to Bethlehem – you need to know that the baby who is born is also about the birth of the King of Righteousness, justice, and

peace. He comes not to bring peace – but a sword. Not a sword in the military sense – but a sword that separates the wheat from the chaff.

John knows there is a big difference between religion and spirituality – and faith in the Living God. John wants to separate his people from the lies and illusions they have become accustomed to – and to put the people back on the way of simple faith and obedience and worship of the Living God. There is a big difference between the way of the world – and the way of Jesus – that John is preparing for us.

As Eugene Peterson shares, three honest words characterize the preaching and teaching of John. They are not words that recommend us to God – but words that prepare us for God.

REPENT IS THE FIRST HONEST WORD.

John declares that you and I must change the direction of our lives. We want the wrong things. We go after the wrong things. We believe and assimilate into our lives the wrong things.

We want and even desire the right things – we want better lives. However, left to our own insights we dig ourselves deeper into the mess we are already in. To repent – declares that God is now in charge. U-turns are allowed. God desires and even wills to love us into eternity. Will we let him do it?

Repentance means we let go of all our idols. An idol is a god with all the God taken out of it. Which is why it often looks like us.

John the Baptist declares we must look at what God is doing. God is still at work in history and creation. Stop letting the journalist have the last word – and get in on what God is doing.

VIPER OR SNAKE IS THE SECOND HONEST WORD THAT JOHN SPEAKS.

Now before you get offended look at who the words are directed to: people like me – the religious establishment.

There were people who came out to the desert who had no intention of changing their slithering ways. They had no intention of stopping their poisonous works. They were the religious junkies of their time. All they wanted was a little fire insurance. They wanted to escape. They liked their religion to be cosmetic – not transformational. John wanted more than Bible reading – he wanted Bible living. These folks wanted to know what God could do for them – rather than report to duty and place their lives in the service of God. President John F. Kennedy was absolutely right when he said, “Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask what you can do for your country.” Faith is not based on convenience – but commitment.

John said, 'bear fruit worthy of your new life and change of direction.' If your identity is based on God – where is the proof?

When I was in college (a long time ago) there was a poster I have never forgotten to this day. It said, "If you were arrested for being a Christian – would there be enough evidence to convict you?"

THE LAST HONEST WORD IS FIRE.

Fire changes what it touches. Nothing can keep its identity in the fire. Fire does not stay on the outside – it enters to the inside. John is saying this fire is more than a warm fuzzy or a calming fireplace. You can't keep God at a distance. This fire blazes up inside of you – and the glow of salvation can be seen by all.

So ends the altar call of 'Heeere's Johnny" at the River Jordan.

Growing up my mother and father often shared many words of challenge and warning with me. Those words of warning were not always received with joy and acceptance. However, I am here today because I heard them – not as words of scorn – but words spoken in love for my well being.

One of my favorite preachers and mentors, Dr. William Willimon, was elected a Bishop of our United Methodist church in 2004. Before his election – he shared this story that will be our closing word today. A relative of his wife by the name of Sam dies. Sam attended a small Independent Baptist Church in North Georgia. He accompanies his wife to the funeral service. The preacher got up and said: "It is too late for Sam. Sam always wanted something more for his life – but he blew it. It is too late for Sam. He had many chances. However, Sam is dead – he does not get another chance. But it isn't too late for you. Why wait? Today can be the day of salvation! Repent! Make your life count for something. Give your life to Jesus." The preacher went on and on and on.

After the funeral in the car driving back to Duke University – Will turns to his wife and said, "That was terrible. That was hard to take. I would never do that to a grieving family. That had to be the most manipulative – inappropriate – tacky funeral sermon I have ever heard."

His wife responded, "Will – you are absolutely right." Then she continued and said, "and the most outrageous thing was this – **it was the truth!**"

There are many 'Sams' in our world who need to hear that God wants – expects – and makes possible our repentance.

Those who have ears – let them hear!

ENDNOTES

Resources used in the development of this message:

Pastor Eric would like to acknowledge the profound influence of the following works upon this gospel message:

- Eugene H. Peterson, **CONVERSATIONS: The Message with Its Translator**, NavPress, 2007, page 1488, **Matthew 3:1-12** text was read for both worship services.
- Eugene H. Peterson, **PRAYING WITH JESUS**, Harper: San Francisco, 1993, January 21-24 devotionals.
- Eugene H. Peterson, **THE JESUS WAY**, Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, Grand Rapids, MI, pages 121-126.
- The story by William H. Willimon, now Bishop Willimon, I first heard on a Preaching Today tape many years ago.